

The National Food Strategy and our response to Food Poverty (Barnsley Health & Wellbeing Board 08.10.20)

1. Introduction

This paper is presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board to provide a brief overview of the recently published National Food Strategy and our response to food poverty which is being managed under the branding Good Food Barnsley

2. The National Food Strategy

Published on July 29th this year, the Government-commissioned National Food Strategy (NFS) represents an independent review of the entire national food system, offering recommendations on the need for healthier diets and tackling food insecurity within the UK.

The paper, led by Henry Dimbleby, Lead Non-executive Board Member for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is the first of two papers and is, in effect, an introduction to the immediate problems we face. A second report is due to be published early next year which will address the identified issues in more detail, ranging from climate change and agriculture to public health and COVID-19. The second paper will produce a range of further recommendations and a comprehensive plan for transformation, to which government will formally respond.

The strategy pays homage to the food industry for its efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the country went into lockdown on March 16th, the national food system endured a massive stress test. The fact that there were no serious food shortages is testament to the flexibility, adaptability, and resilience of so many food businesses and the system as a whole. Indeed, acknowledgement should be given to the local response in Barnsley that included the establishment of our emergency contact centre that coordinated emergency food aid in our communities. This was done in partnership with voluntary community responders who worked tirelessly to deliver food packs to those in need. This was only made possible because of our strong established relationships with organisations such as the Company Shop, Fareshare and with support of the local colleges.

There are two main focusses to the NFS. Firstly, addressing the “worst cracks” in the British food system that have appeared because of the pandemic. Secondly, to find ways of maintaining the UK’s high food standards and animal welfare standards once the UK leaves the European Union and will need to seek new trade deals around the world.

The context of COVID-19 is very much embedded into the strategy and an emphasis on healthy weight is expressed throughout. This is because being overweight or obese are risk factors for worse outcomes in those who are infected by COVID-19. The World Health Organisation (WHO) advise that obesity is overwhelmingly associated with a higher risk of intensive care unit admission and higher risk of death. Indeed, a recent report¹ in the UK shows that out of 10,465 patients critically ill with COVID-19, 73.7% were either overweight or obese.

¹ Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre, COVID-19 Report (2020)

What is also concerning and brought to light in the strategy, is that obesity is significantly more prevalent in the lowest income decile than in the highest (36% of the most deprived in society are obese, vs 21% of those in the least deprived). The statistics are even more skewed for children. By the age of 11, children from the poorest neighbourhoods are three times more likely to be obese than those from the richest ones, and this gap is growing, with COVID-19 no doubt accelerating the discrepancy.

Within the NFS there are seven recommendations, with the first four revolving around improving food access for the most disadvantaged children. These include expanding the eligibility age for the Free School Meal scheme (for children up to the age of 16 rather than up to the end of Year 2 of primary school). Another recommendation is to increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers from £3.10 per week to £4.25 per week, and to expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

The other three recommendations revolve around future trade deals with other countries and trying to ensure that any food entering our country is subject to the same level of environmental and animal welfare standards that we have adopted in the UK. There is however, justifiable concern about opening our markets to cheaper, lower-standard imports which would undercut our own producers and make a nonsense of our progressive farming policies.

One recommendation for government in this section is for Government to only agree to cut tariffs in new trade deals on products which meet our domestic standards and for standard verification programmes to be established. This would mean that producers wishing to sell into the UK market can, and must, prove they meet these minimum standards.

Part one of the NFS is in excess of 100 pages and it is therefore beyond the scope of this paper to summarise and detail each individual section. However, readers are encouraged to view the strategy in its entirety which can be found in Appendix 1.

3. Local Context

In Barnsley, 65.8% of adults are either overweight or obese. This poses a risk to health and wellbeing under normal circumstances and is now further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because, as previously stated, being overweight or obese are risk factors for worse outcomes in those who are infected by COVID-19.

With our adult excess weight prevalence being high and our borough having areas of very high deprivation, some of which fall within the 10% most deprived areas in the country, this is cause for concern. As evidenced in the NFS, obesity is typically more prevalent across this decile. Therefore, by working towards improving food access we're not just helping people move away from food insecurity and hunger, but also maintaining or improving overall health and a healthy weight, and subsequently reducing a range of risks to health, including COVID-19.

4. Local Response

With excess weight being one of the few modifiable risk factors for COVID-19, it is crucial that we support all people, regardless of status or affluence, to achieve a healthier weight, have access to good food, and to keep fit and well as we move forward with our local and national recovery. For adults who are already overweight or obese, we need to do more to support them to reduce their weight and to improve their health.

With the new National Obesity Strategy and National Food Strategy both published in July this year, and our local Food Strategy due for renewal in 2021, this is a timely opportunity for Barnsley to align itself with national policy and further establish our local needs and priorities in relation to food and healthy weight.

In Barnsley, we have the Good Food Barnsley Partnership which consists of a range of partners that work effectively across the many complexities involved with food and healthy weight. The agenda is managed through a steering group that meets regularly to ensure that we have a coordinated response to projects and initiatives, and that we address gaps in our communities. The partnership has supported the development of a Good Food Community Interest Company who in future will be the vehicle for bidding for additional resources to support our food strategy. We have a vision to build a better Barnsley where everyone has the right to access the food they need to thrive. A huge focus of the steering group is to move people up the food ladder, from relying on emergency food provision, to an approach that centres dignity, autonomy and choice.

Good Food Barnsley has recently appointed an Innovation Manager to further develop strategy, building relationships with partners, local food retailers and businesses to further establish and sustain progress towards the aforementioned vision. To date we have a number of initiatives in place. These include:

- **The Healthy Holidays scheme** - to deliver holiday activity and meal provision to children in our local areas. This ran during the summer and will continue throughout autumn and winter breaks.
- **Rose Vouchers** - To help families on low incomes to buy fresh fruit and vegetables and support them to give their children the healthiest possible start.
- **Community Shops** – we have two shops in the borough which provide low cost products to buy and support people to plan shopping and cooking. The shops also have cafes attached which means that people can buy a low-cost meal and socially interact in their community setting. We are exploring a third shop.
- **Food Bank** – our foodbank is well established and we are working in partnership to establish new food clubs where people can buy low cost packs of food so they do not feel dependent on hand outs.
- **Green Challenge Fund** – we are submitting an expression of interest to seek funding to repair the glasshouses at Wentworth Castle and to develop a new project to grow fruit and veg and distribute into our local communities.

There are many other initiatives in our community and the innovation manager will be looking at how these fit together and what more we need to do.

Another initiative being considered is for Barnsley Council to take steps towards adopting the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight. The declaration is made up of 16 commitments that are essentially local authority pledges to achieve action on improving policy and healthy weight outcomes in relation to specific areas of the Council's work.

Adopting the declaration would require collaborative working across the Council and with colleagues from external organisations (e.g. Barnsley Hospital, CCG). Although it is titled as a 'local authority' declaration, it would be a borough-wide initiative and would require strong partnership work across all sectors for it to be effective and for change to occur. If pursued further therefore, it would be logical for the work and required actions of the HWD to be coordinated through the already well-established Good Food Barnsley Steering Group.

Risks

- As the Government furlough scheme draws to a close at the end of October, some people may find that they do not have jobs to go back to, resulting in potential increases in food poverty and food insecurity
- If there is a significant second wave of COVID-19 cases in autumn or winter, there may be a sharp rise in the demand for emergency food aid. Coupled with potentially adverse weather conditions and other considerations such as seasonal flu, this demand may breach logistical capacity

Recommendations

- Our first recommendation is that the Board received 6-monthly updates from the Good Food Barnsley Partnership
- Our second recommendation is that the Board considers and discusses how they can contribute to the delivery of future food and obesity plans as senior leaders across the borough

Appendix

Appendix 1: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NFS-Part-One-SP-CP.pdf> (file too large to embed)

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